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Two for One: Notes on Lopate on Sontagby [BLOGGER Jill Dearman](#) on 07-29-2009 11:06 AM

Phillip Lopate's illuminating new book *Notes on Sontag* is at once meditative and stimulating, much like Lopate, much like Sontag. Below, my interview with Lopate. These are mere notes; if you regard the essay as a meaningful art form, you will surely want to create a permanent space on your bookshelf for his latest publication.

JD: In re-reading Sontag for the writing of your book, did you have any kind of about-face on your views about her -- as she did on her own views about photography, between the publication of "On Photography" and "Regarding the Pain of Others"?

PL: I wrote "Notes on Sontag" with great excitement and fear--my heart was in my mouth the whole time. I kept feeling I was trespassing on an intimidating subject, and who was I, little me, to be taking the measure of such a literary icon? But I suppose we writers always have to overcome a sense of modesty and push past it to something like arrogance: "Listen to me! I got something to say!" My confidence came mostly from having written many many essays in the past and being somewhat sure that I could handle the form, regardless of the particular daunting subject. I liked the idea of doing a book-length essay made up of sub-sections, mini-essays, "notes."

JD: For those who pick up your book without having read much Sontag, which pieces of her writing would you direct these readers to? (And any particular reason)?

PL: I started out with a fairly clear idea of which parts of Sontag I liked most, and which seemed most dubious or problematic to me. I read and re-read everything she wrote that was published in book form, and some uncollected pieces. There were little surprises: for instance, this time around I loved the first 35 pages or so of "Trip to Hanoi," before it turned into following a party line. I was charmed by a number of the pieces in *Where the Stress Falls* that had not struck my fancy before, such as the ones on dance. I was surprised to find her last novel "In America" as flat as it seemed to be. But I came away with a higher estimation of "Regarding the Pain of Others," her second book on photography.



JD: You write a lot about Sontag's penchant for aphorism, and her talent for it; is there a particular one that stays with you - whether you "believe" it or not?

PL: Sontag's work is sprinkled with hundreds of aphorisms, maxims and generalizations. No one is particular stands out in memory (I am on the road, away from my books), but it's the habit of mind that seems admirable: her willingness to extend a thought by asserting the overall pattern underneath it.

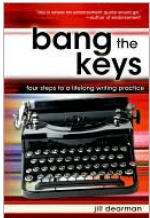
JD: I saw a production of Sontag's play "Alice in Bed" at New York Theatre Workshop several years ago, and it did have a very haunting, transcendent feeling for me - much like Arthur Miller's late-career play, "Broken Glass" - both about women who have taken to their bed. What further notes do you have on Sontag the dramatist?

PL: Theater was very important for Sontag. Her play "Alice in Bed" is indeed a haunting work, and conveys something of her essential loneliness and desire to make a social set of the dead authors and historical figures she revered. I have never seen it performed, and would like to. She herself was such a theatrical personality, it's as if she walked around ever ready to address the last row of an invisible amphitheater.

JD: What do you think her response to your book would have been?

PL: I have no idea what her response to my book would be. I suppose she would find it cheeky and presumptuous, but another part of it would be pleased and flattered. Sontag was a complicated person, and could be extremely generous sometimes, when not threatened. In the solitude of her reading room (somewhere in heaven) she may be smiling wryly.

Indeed! For more writerly chat as well as some writerly this and that, check out <http://www.bangthekeys.com> and for tips on writing (and my Sontag tale) see my new book *Bang the Keys*.



What writer have YOU re-visited again and again? Send your notes!

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by Shotmonster on 07-29-2009 05:19 PM

Options

Thanks for another great post.

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by Heather_Rolland on 07-30-2009 08:02 AM

Options

Thank you, Jill, for another great interview that offers us a real view into Lopate's (and via Lopate, Sontag's) work. I very much appreciated Lopate's perspective on going back and re-reading Sontag, and being open to the surprises. There is such a dialog, such relationship, between reader and author - and Lopate illustrates so nicely how when the reader grows or changes perspective, the work can "grow" too.

I particularly enjoyed hearing comments on the notion of "trespassing on an intimidating subject, and who was I, little me ..." I call this The Imposter Syndrome, and am always looking for new and effective ways to banish it from my writing life. Thank you for words of inspiration to acknowledge and move through this challenge.

Heather www.heatherolland.com

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by Blogger Jill_Dearman on 07-30-2009 09:20 AM

Options

"The Imposter Syndrome" ... terrific! I think almost all writers can relate to this. Thanks, Heather -- Jill

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by DeborahTaylor on 08-03-2009 11:52 PM

Options

Great post. Sontag deserves another read!

Posting a comment on your blog is very difficult. I have done it once before after much work. I read the blog every week and would like to offer some feedback, but figuring the system out takes too much time-- especially after signing in to the account. They need a web designer. Also, I just had a horrible experience in an actual BN store and think the company needs to "get with it" in many ways. At this point I am so jaded by my experiences with them that I will actively avoid them.

Anyway, I love the blog and want to comment. You are doing a great job!

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by starrXX on 08-04-2009 09:18 PM

Options

What good questions you ask! I love when Lopate writes about the being caught between insecurity and confidence. "I've got something to say" keeps us writing.

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by Blogger Jill_Dearman on 08-05-2009 10:55 AM

Options

Deborah, Sorry about the posting problems. I know it is being worked on, and thanks for taking the extra time when time is in such demand. And Starr you are so right about what keeps us writing. And somehow hearing it from the esteemed Mr. L is very reassuring!

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